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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the history of environmental education in New Zealand over the last fifteen years, reviewing that history in the context of concurrent changes in the school curriculum and wider society. Preliminary conclusions concerning the potential role of environmental education as a socially transformative agent are developed as a lens through which to examine ourselves as educators. It concludes that belief in a future constructed around social and environmental justice and the common good requires us to expand our role beyond the educational into the arena of politics in order to counter political intrusion into education. (Contains 31 references.) (Author/YDS)

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Environmental Education:

A Case Study of Education

for the Public Good

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Abstract:

This paper examines the history of environmental education in New Zealand over the last fifteen years, reviewing that history in the context of concurrent changes in the school curriculum and wider society. Preliminary conclusions concerning the potential role of environmental education as a socially transformative agent are developed as a lens through which to examine ourselves as educators. It concludes that belief in a future constructed around social and environmental justice and the common good requires us to expand our role beyond the educational into the arena of politics in order to counter political intrusion into education.

Introduction

Post War New Zealand prided itself on its concern for social justice and equality, its welfare state which provided free health care and education for all citizens and its historical record of positive social innovation. In the last fifteen years those social structures have been progressively dismantled as successive governments have sought to establish a competitive enterprise economy. These efforts have been founded on social and political theories which view people as self-serving individuals. The policies that have resulted have increased inequity within New Zealand society by recruiting social processes to ensure that people are placed in competition with each other. These changes, however, render the agenda of capitalism very transparent and expose very clearly the philosophical collision that is inevitable in an economic system in which wealth and power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few, operating in a political system which claims to serve the majority.

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It is no longer possible, in this social context, to view government as a benign agent for public good. The fabric of New Zealand society has irrevocably changed over the last fifteen years. One senses, however, at this moment, November 1999 as the nation goes to the polls, that people are looking for alternatives because they can feel but not articulate the ugly realities of unfettered self interest. The process of restructuring that we have endured may then serve as an opportunity to set new directions for ourselves that we would not otherwise have been awake to.

Recent Political Events

In late 1984 when the Labour Party (traditionally centre left) came to power to find itself in fiscal crisis, the cupboard was bare. It began a restructing programme that has continued over the last five electoral terms, two of them Labour terms, two subsequent National party (traditionally centre right) terms and a current coalition government. Use of traditional centre left centre right descriptions is of little value however because the whole rhetoric of government has moved so far to the right that traditional benchmarks are meaningless.

The restructuring process involved the reconstitution of employment law, the sale of state assets such as Railways, telecommunications and postal services to private owners, the establishment of state owned enterprises in other areas such as electricity generation and supply, and an attempted withdrawal of government from an active role in the economy to a regulatory minimum. These changes were described in the New Zealand Submission to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 in the following terms:

> The role of the State today is seen more as providing the policies and the legal and regulatory framework within which people themselves make their decisions which affect their lives ...
>
> The government has withdrawn from much of its direct involvement in development projects . . in the belief that private enterprise is more motivated and better equipped to made decisions resulting in the most effective use of resources ...
>
> Since about 1985, New Zealand has moved rapidly to allocate private property rights to publicly owned resources as part of Governments general withdrawal from involvement in commercial enterprise ...
>
> Re-evaluation of the role of the state has extended to social policy. In the past, it was widely accepted that the state had a role to play in creating the socio economic environment in which the population could achieve well-being ...
>
> However, the escalating fiscal cost of these (social) services has led to a re-examination of the role of the state in their delivery, and the balance between state involvement and individual and community responsibilities.

(Ministry for the Environment, 1991, pp. 91-92)

Ideologies in Policy Development

Statements of the nature of those above however, often obscure more than they illuminate. For example, any notion of what "effective" use of resources might mean is absent from the passage. In general however the linking of words such as "effective" and "profitable" by using the word enterprise is a very narrow but plausible and potentially dangerous use of language. Further, this rhetoric completely overlooks the role of the state as a collective owner on behalf of all its citizens or any notion of the state

as an agent of public good, a subject extensively covered by Saul (1995). This is fundamental to the rhetoric of the Right and is informed by a number of theatrical sources including public choice theory, new public management, principal-agency theory and transactional cost analysis (Codd 1998) which hinge on the views that humans are rational utility maximisers. The argument follows that to prevent the capture of public services by their providers who will seek to maximise their own interests, competition is required. Based on these views which eminate from the New Zealand Treasury and the Business Round Table (Peters and Marshall 1997), a new infrastructure of contestation for resources and contracting for the provision of public services has arisen. These structures while apparently devolving decision making and responsibility in fact give government ever tighter control over a range of social functions through budget control and accountability regimes. These structures are founded on a number very dubious views of human activity.

The first of these is that capitalism is apparently the only way in which to conduct human economic activity. A second is that competition is the vital force of capitalism and is not only a vital force for good in its own right but also a useful mechanism for the control of the self seeking nature of individual humans. It also considers that the market is the ordained mechanism by which individuals exercise their choices, thus human relations are nothing more than economic transactions. These assumptions are deeply and almost invisibly buried in the language of the new right.

That these assumptions are flawed and serve as a rhetorical mask covering the mainspring of capitalism which depends on squeezing the poor and exploiting the environment to create profit has been widely articulated and will not be elaborated here. In the New Zealand context, however over the last fifteen years the richest 15% of the population have prospered, the next 25% held their own and the remaining 60% are worse off (Cambell, 1998) and O'Neill (1997) reports that rate of growth of inequity in New Zealand is the highest in the world.

These issues are not unique to New Zealand. In 1983 John Huckle described the reactionary trends in British and American politics as cloaked by liberal rhetoric (Huckle 1983) and more recently interpreted these changes as attempts by capitalism to regenerate profitability (Huckle 1993). Faber and O'Connor (1993) have described the way in which transnational corporations have proceeded to restore profitability and the ways in which business has been able to exploit governments and people at the expense of the poor in particular and the environment in general. The point here is twofold: firstly that events in New Zealand, far from being unique, provide a window through which to view the general restructuring process described above; secondly, rather than being the answer to human problems, capitalism is very largely the cause of these problems. The changes in New Zealand, built as they are on the notion of humans as "autonomous choosers" (O'Neill 1997, Peter and Marshall, 1997), have resulted in social structures in which it has become very difficult to function cooperatively. Indeed they are structures to designed to develop in people the qualities of self-centredness assumed of them by the theoretical positions described above. John Codd (1998) has described this in terms of a culture of mistrust.

Social Structures in Action

The way that the ideologies of the right manifest themselves in social structures can be seen in a range of contexts. In New Zealand environmental policy the Government's 2010 Strategy (Ministry for the Environment 1995) sets out key conditions for achieving its vision as:

> **A competitive enterprise economy** - a growing economy that can compete internationally and provide the resources for social needs and for protection of the environment.
>
> **Effective Laws and Policies** - a body of laws and government policies that provide certainty and achieve environmental goals effectively and efficiently.

(Ministry for the Environment, 1995, p. 9)

This incomplete list (the first two of four factors which go on to include "information" and "social participation") introduces the notions of enterprise, growth, international competition and efficiency. Later descriptors stress environmental management. This strategy document was followed in 1998 by an environmental education strategy (Ministry for the Environment, 1998) and one of the Ministry's response to it in late 1998 was to put out for public tender the enactment of the first priorities established in the strategy. Thus the assumptions of previous sections are turned into reality through a competitive tendering process. This process places any groups wishing to be involved in environmental education in competition with each other, thus fulfilling its assumptions.

In the area of health the government initially set up a series of regional Crown Health Enterprises (now under change as a result of prolonged public pressure). Through the process of cutting health spending these C.H.E.s were forced to make drastic changes to health provision, charge for services previously free and make rationing decisions on behalf of government. The C.H.E.s also had to take the responsibility for this process since they were responsible for health delivery. The changes of course were forced by government and made necessary by the levels of funding provided. Meanwhile the user pays philosophy introduced in this process ensures that the wealthy have continued access to health care which has become more difficult for those less well off. These structural changes have been presented to the electorate under rhetorical banners of efficiency and choice.

In the area of Education a set of complex changes have altered the face of schooling:

- School administration is in the hands of local school boards of Trustees who are held accountable through the Education Act.
- The curriculum has been completely rewritten since 1993 and is strongly focussed on objectives.
- Curriculum enactment is monitored by the Education Review Office which functions under its own ministry and its reports are made public.
- School zoning has been abolished so parents have choice about which school their children attend.

While, on one hand, the curriculum in general [and the Technology Curriculum in particular (O'Neill and Jolley, 1997)], is imbued with the ideology of the right, on the other, the review process provides a gauge by which parents can apparently judge the success of schools in enacting this ideologically biased curriculum. Meanwhile the ability of parents to shift children effectively puts schools in direct competition with each other and makes any alternative interpretation of the curriculum very risky (Peters and Marshal, 1997). These mechanisms, it has been argued, have allowed increased control over education by government. (Codd, McAlpine and Poskitt, 1995).

Role of Schooling and the Role of Environmental Education

While schools have long been agreed to reproduce society as it is, the recent shifts described above serve to try and reconstruct schooling to serve the growing strength of enterprise and the New Right. Huckle (1983, 1993) draws attention to the motives behind these moves as being to increase the correspondence between schooling and production. In contrast, environmental education seeks to restructure society in the opposite direction toward cooperation, social justice and action on behalf of the environment. The Belgrade Charter (UNESCO UNEP, 1976) called for a new global ethic. The Tbilisi declaration that followed from it (UNESCO UNEP 1978) called for solidarity (not competition) between countries, for the creation of new patterns of behaviour toward the environment and on analysis of the real causes of environmental problems. A number of authors (O'Riordan, 1989; Huckle, 1993; Faber and O' Connor 1995) along with a number of sources cited by Gough (1997) affirm the notion that capitalism is the cause of environmental problems through its reliance on exploitation of both people and the environment. Environmental Education thus stands as a potential challenge to both the role of schooling in society and to the role of capitalism as a way of organizing society points raised by Robottom (1984), by Stenhouse (1977) and Aldrich and Blackburn (1975/1977, both in Gough 1997). Whilst Gough

(1997, p. 42-42) exposes the Tbilisi declaration to some critique, Gough (1997, p. 42-43) she also considers that it contains goals which challenge both schooling and the nature of society. When viewed in this light, the problems and barriers that have been faced by environmental educators are logical and the expected results of a fundamental clash of values. Rather than being surprised by the lack of support for the transformative goals of environmental education described by Gough (as Annette Greenall 1987), this can be seen to be entirely consistent with the nature of capitalism and the agenda of the Right. In this light too the rhetoric reality gap described by Stevenson (1986) is exactly what one would expect since the substance of environmental education will never be supported by governments who will be exposed to critique by it.

Recent New Zealand Curriculum History

In 1988, the last recognisably liberal minister of education, Russell Marshall, published a curriculum discussion document at the end of a long curriculum consultation. In this statement (Department of Education 1987) he created new curriculum groupings including "Science, Environment and Technology". He was replaced shortly afterwards in the Education Portfolio by Prime Minister David Lange, who began a reorganisation of educational administration under the banner of "Tomorrows Schools" which has been alluded to previously.

After the Labour Party's defeat in 1990, a new conservative minister resuscitated the process of curriculum reform and produced a new draft curriculum framework (Ministry of Education 1991). In this Science and environment formed one subject heading and Technology emerged as a new stand alone heading, reflecting the government's agenda for education.

At the Rio Earth Summit, as a signatory to Agenda 21, the New Zealand government undertook to ...

> ... strive to update or prepare strategies aimed at integrating environment and development as a cross-cutting issue into education at all levels within the next three years
>
> (Agenda 21, UNCED, 1992, Ch. 36, p. 265).

When the final Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education 1993) was published however, "environment" had gone from the Essential Learning Area headings completely. It can be found in the small print however:

> Other important areas of study such as the environment ... are included in a number of essential learning areas
>
> (Ministry of Education, 1993 p. 8)

Thus, over the period in which the New Zealand government agreed to act on behalf of the environment in curriculum development they effectively wrote it out.

The three year period following Rio of course elapsed in 1995. In this year the Ministry of Education let a contract for the production of a Policy and Guidelines statement in environmental education. However it was not published and Lein and Baker (1997), lament the problems they encountered in their involvement in this process. It was not until June 1998 that a Strategy for Environmental Education (Ministry for the Environment 1998) appeared and finally in the second half of 1999 official Guidelines for Environmental Education were published (Ministry for the Environment 1999). While the Minister of Education and Environment now have a well produced artefact for public display there are three substantive issues that should remain a focus. Firstly it was four years behind the timetable set at Rio and more than a decade behind the curriculum moves in Australia. Secondly, it is **not** a curriculum document. As a set of guidelines it lies outside of the formal Curriculum Statements that schools are required to enact. This absolutely parallels events occurring in the UK reported by John Elliot in which environmental education was margnalised in curriculum and promoted at the periphery (Elliot, 1995, p. 389). The third point is that the Strategy and Subsequent Guidelines mentioned above cite the objectives

of the Tbilisi declaration. (UNESCO UNEP, 1978) in modified form: awareness and sensitivity, knowledge and understanding, attitudes and values, skills and participating action, but neglect some of the more powerful statements elsewhere in the declaration such as examination of the symptoms and root causes of environmental problems, critical thinking and a commitment to a better tomorrow. As an illustration of this, in its section on education for the environment the Guidelines state:

> Education for the environment seeks ways in which people can minimise their impact on the environment. In a society that values freedom and choice and resources are finite, it is important to develop a sense of responsibility about the social and natural environments ...
>
> (Ministry for Environment, 1999).

References to lifestyle choices, freedom, and choice in general, all touchstones of New Right ideology, immediately compromise attempts at action on behalf of the environment and constrain the "for the environment" component.

Events of this nature of course are not unique and as Greenall (1987) and Elliot (1995) indicate this is not by accident. Instead it is the predictable and expected result of the tensions in a capitalist democracy.

The Contradictory Role of the State

This gap between public political stances for the environment and the level of real support given to back, them arises from the inherently contradictory role of the state in a capitalist democracy. On one hand the state must create the conditions for economic activity and capital accumulation while on the other it must have the legitimacy of electoral support. This involves mitigating the social and environmental costs of economic activity. The current political settlement in New Zealand has convinced the electorate that the costs of social equity and environment protection are too high (Ministry for the Environment, 1992). Voters in general, though, are concerned about the quality of the environment and political parties must convince them that they share that concern. The financial costs of meeting the full social and environmental cost of economic activity stifle profitability however, therefore governments actually do as little as possible. Dunkley (1992) has reviewed the tensions and frightening rhetoric of the economics of environmental protection where the "optimum" level of pollution is the maximum the populace will tolerate before costly measures are required in response.

In the educational context John Elliot (1995) has captured the political manoeuvrings involved in maintaining the appearance of action by politicians whilst actually doing nothing to rock the economic boat. The particular quality of the 1990s, however, is that far from trying to increase environmental concern and positive action in a stable political atmosphere, we face the problem of doing so in one that seeks to enhance the ability of enterprise to generate profit from the environment. Thus we see the government in New Zealand giving permission to Timberlands West Coast (a State Owned Enterprise) to fell indigenous beech forest in a fragile ecosystem, the only constraint being that it must find a market for the timber, a decision made in the face of environmental protest. Moves such as this demonstrate that the government's real commitment to environmental protection is zero. This is again the transparent and expected manifestation of the real agenda of the right, which is profit.

Possibilities for Action

These are the current sociopolitical realities in New Zealand. They present problems of a substantial nature for educators in general and environmental educators in particular. Are there ways of confronting these realities and changing them? In the first instance one must say 'yes' for there is no other answer save hopelessness, but I think there are ways forward provided we confront some basic issues relating to environmental education.

> **Issue One** Environmental education is a political issue as much as an educational one, perhaps more so. It is my first assertion that to fail to

acknowledge this is to be completely ineffective.

Issue Two Having acknowledged the political nature of environmental education it must also be acknowledged as a socially reconstructive activity, one that seeks to change societies. And, given the political forces described above, that is a radical stance. If you are an environmentalist you are a radical.

Issue Three Failure to acknowledge both of the previous two statements renders any attempts at environmental action almost a waste of time since the actor will be unknowingly or uncritically passing on the values and assumptions buried in the current rhetoric of government policy.

While these issues arise clearly from the goals of environmental education they are equally true of any educational process. Issues of "what", "how", and "for whom" arise in most contexts and their analysis confronts social and political process. Education per se is inherently political. Environmental education, as a relatively new domain, has always been aware of its own political nature and is framed in a way that makes it clearly identifiable as a socially transformative activity for the public good. It provides a lens for seeing that all educational activity can be viewed similarly. Debates that have arisen as the New Zealand curriculum has been rewritten during the 1990s in Technology (O'Neill and Jolley 1997) Science (Bell, Jones and Carr, 1995) and Social Studies (Openshaw, 1997) have brought issues of ideological tension to the surface across the curriculum.

In analysing the ideological nature of these processes, Marshall and Peters (1997) have lamented the apparent inactivity of the liberal left in response to the activity of the right. Codd (1998) goes further to suggest that responses to the educational problems we now face must be political as much as educational. While these two sources implicitly confirm the importance of the three central issues identified above, they also suggest that in responding to the restructuring of education by the right action on two fronts is required, both educational and political.

Firstly as mentioned previously the New Zealand curriculum has been rewritten over the period 1992 to 1998 in a way that tunes it to the agenda of the right (Codd, McAlpine and Poskitt, 1995; O'Neill, 1997; O'Neill and Jolley, 1997; Openshaw, 1997). However, it retains many statements of intent that provide potential for confronting these values. It urges teachers to make links across the curriculum and under this rubric potentially transformative statements can be taken together to form a powerful mandate for transformative action. The English curriculum stresses critical thinking. Guardianship is required in Science, Social Justice appears in Social Studies as do notions of environmental health in the Health and Physical Wellbeing Curriculum. Even the Technology Curriculum invites students to consider the impact of technology on people and the environment. The author has conducted an analysis of the New Zealand curriculum which identifies the opportunities within it to teach environmental education goals (Chapman, 1999).

Central to this, however, is identifying and analysing values positions inherent in both environmental goals and in the positions taken by protagonists in environmental issues. Teaching effectively, and teaching environmental education in particular, involves making problematic previously unchallenged social structures such as the nature of democracy, notions of a just equitable society, the responsibilities of society to its members, along with more traditional environmental topics and issues. I assert once again, however, that this must be done in full knowledge that this is radical teaching of a politically critical nature and that the rhetoric of social justice and environmental concern that is buried in the New Zealand Curriculum is being made to live in a way perhaps not envisaged by policy makers. This can only be sustained by a thorough knowledge of what is in the curriculum and by sound programs that demonstrably target a wide range of curriculum goals as well the critical environmental education goals.

This is a short term strategy however, based on socially critical teaching hung on the rhetoric for social justice and the environment in a curriculum founded on the ideology of the right which has no place for the public good (Codd 1998). Thus the second front for action must be political and here, too, education in general might productively borrow from the domain of environmental education. Environmental

education stresses the importance of an action component. Perhaps educationalists in general can adopt this notion. If we believe in education for the public good, for justice and equity (which many of us are on public record as doing), and if we understand the mechanisms by which our society is becoming less just and less equitable (which we do), then what are we doing about it? It is my contention that we can no longer hide from the responsibility to take political action both at the level of advocating political candidates and parties who are likely to work for social and environmental justice and also within political parties to ensure that the policy formation process is as just and informed as possible.

Functional Democracy requires work. Perhaps citizens in democracies have been complacent and abdicated from that responsibility with the result that the democratic process has been easily co-opted by the right for the service of self interest. We need, perhaps, not only to involve ourselves in the political life of our democracies, but also to encourage and teach others the vital importance of such participation, and to rekindle notions of public good in a decade that has done much to diminish both of them.

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